

Title: ***Animal Farm***

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[(essay date 6 August 1954) *In the following essay, Woodhouse discusses Animal Farm as a fairy tale.*]

In the sixth volume of *The Second World War*, Sir Winston Churchill has described the scene at Potsdam in July, 1945, when from a little distance he watched President Truman tell Marshal Stalin of the great event that was to take place in the following month; the latest triumph of western genius, the masterpiece that was destined so profoundly to affect the history of the world. The Marshal showed polite interest, the mildest of curiosity that barely rose above the level of indifference, and no comprehension whatever. Sir Winston was sure, he tells us,

that he had no idea of the significance of what he was being told. ... If he had had the slightest idea of the revolution in world affairs which was in progress his reactions would have been obvious. ... But his face remained gay and genial. ...

According to President Truman, he did not even ask a single question.

What Marshal Stalin was being told about was not, though as a matter of mere chronological chance it could have been, the imminent publication of a little book called ***Animal Farm***, which appeared on the bookstalls in the same month in which the atomic bomb hit Hiroshima and Nagasaki. No doubt the Marshal's reaction would have been much the same if it had been; and perhaps--though this is still a very much longer shot--his reaction would have been just as inappropriate. It was nothing but an arbitrary coincidence that brought these two events together in August, 1945, though they took almost equally long to prepare: George Orwell's whole life was spent in preparation of ***Animal Farm***, and the text itself bears the dates "November, 1943--February, 1944," months when the Manhattan project was also moving towards a climax. But it was a coincidence that must have given Orwell a sad, ironic satisfaction: for there are those who have argued that, looked at in a wider historical context, the first atomic bombs were aimed at a quite different political target which had nothing to do with the Japanese war; and there are others who have convinced themselves that ***Animal Farm*** was also aimed at a political target--the same one. Orwell himself might perhaps have admitted to agreeing with both interpretations; but he would also surely have argued that his personal enemy was no single individual or government--it was the system of the world capable of producing and using atomic bombs. In this case the coincidence of August, 1945, was even more remarkable. Disciples of Professor Toynbee yet unborn may well point to it as one of history's most striking conjunctions of challenge and

response.

These are early days to claim that the pen is mightier than the atomic bomb; but Orwell would not have flinched from the confrontation. It is not much more than one hundred years since Bulwer Lytton discovered for us that the pen is mightier than the sword, already then an obsolescent weapon, and even that only Beneath the rule of men entirely great, a sufficiently rare state of affairs. In the last hundred years enough has happened to justify us in believing that the pen's response to the challenge of force is at least not ludicrous and hopeless; indeed, it is perhaps the one serious hope we have. Certainly it would not have seemed ludicrous to Sir Winston Churchill to have spoken in the context of 1945 of a book instead of a bomb, for the pen has always been the first weapon in his armoury; and with it he won the most crucial victory in the history of our race, in the battle that was joined with the words: "We shall defend our island whatever the cost may be ..." Sir Winston had the advantage, it is true (though it is also true that he furnished that advantage himself), of proving Bulwer's epigram in the exact conditions required by Bulwer's qualifying line. George Orwell had come to doubt before he died (at any rate, when he wrote *1984*) whether those conditions would ever be seen on earth again. But there is no doubt whatever that it was a purpose of the same kind that Orwell was setting himself to achieve by his writings, and especially when he wrote ***Animal Farm***.

If the book itself had left any doubt of the matter, Orwell dispelled it in an article which he called "Why I Write" a few years later:

Every line of serious work that I have written since 1936 has been written, directly or indirectly, against totalitarianism ... ***Animal Farm*** was the first book in which I tried, with full consciousness of what I was doing, to fuse political purpose and artistic purpose into one whole.

In the criticisms of some of his contemporaries which Orwell wrote even earlier than ***Animal Farm***, his recurrent theme was their failure to protest against the world they lived in. This is the whole burden of his longest and most serious piece of literary criticism, written in 1940 on Henry Miller; and he called it "Inside the Whale" to illustrate this same point, that Miller had failed in his duty to protest, had "performed the essential Jonah act of allowing himself to be swallowed, remaining passive, *accepting*." In the same essay he criticized a line of Mr. Auden's poem "Spain":

The conscious acceptance of guilt in the necessary murder,

with the comment that: "it could only be written by a person to whom murder is at most a *word*. Personally I would not speak so lightly of murder." It is odd, then, to find that in ***Animal Farm*** he does speak just so lightly of murder; that in fact he places on record a score of murders without a measurable flicker of emotion in excess of Mr. Auden's. It is odder still, at first sight, to find ***Animal Farm*** sub-titled "A Fairy Story"; for we are accustomed to think of the fairy-story as the escapist form of literature *par excellence*.

In what sense can ***Animal Farm*** properly be called a fairy-story? It tells how the animals captured the Manor Farm from its drunken incompetent farmer; how they changed its name to Animal Farm and established it as a model community in which all animals were equal; how two pigs, Napoleon and Snowball, gained control of the revolution and fought each other for the mastery; how the neighbouring humans reacted and counter-attacked and were beaten off; how Napoleon ousted Snowball and declared him a traitor; how economic necessity compelled the animals to compromise with the human system; how Napoleon negotiated an alliance with the human enemy and

exploited it to establish his personal dictatorship; how the farm learned that "some animals are more equal than others" and their last state was as bad as their first; and how the ruling pigs became daily more and more indistinguishable from their human neighbours. There is little here at first sight that we associate with the fairy-story: there is no element of magic, once the initial convention of zoomorphism is accepted; there is no happy ending, except one for the villains; there is no Prince Charming or maiden in distress or sentimental interest of any kind, beyond the personal tragedy of the cart-horse Boxer and the frivolous vanity of the white mare Mollie. The fairy-story is an elastic category--Andrew Lang included *A Voyage to Lilliput* in the very first of his coloured fairy-books; and certainly not all the conventional ingredients are essential to a fairy-story. Yet it would be natural to suppose that at least some of them ought to be found there; and at first sight it is tempting to conclude that Orwell wrote his sub-title with his tongue in his cheek, and to read ***Animal Farm*** with our tongues in ours. And then it is impossible to understand why the book has had such a world-wide appeal to human sentiment in the past nine years, for books written in a mere spirit of teasing do not.

In fact Orwell was a deep lover of words who never consciously misused them. If he said he had written a fairy-story with a political purpose, we cannot lightly suppose he spoke lightly. A political purpose suggests some kind of moral, and that suggests rather the fable, the medium of Aesop or La Fontaine or even Thurber. There have been fairy-stories purporting to have morals before now: Rimsky-Korsakov called *Le Coq d'Or* "a fairy-tale with a moral," though no one except possibly the Russian Imperial Censor (who objected to the original version of the opera as subversive) has ever been able to detect what it was. There is something freakish about the idea, anyway, which makes it seem unlikely to stir the emotions of the common reader; and it is impossible to attach a moral in any familiar sense to ***Animal Farm***, where wickedness ends in triumph and virtue is utterly crushed. There is perhaps a moral for farmers: don't take to drink and let your animals get out of hand; but, even so, the villains will be comforted to find that everything comes out all right for them in the end. For the downtrodden animals there is nothing but misery, cruelty and injustice; and in place of a moral there is only the tragic chorus of the donkey Benjamin, who held that "life would go on as it had always gone on--that is, badly." This is not like the kind of moral that tells us to look before we leap or not to count our boobies before they are hatched. For the animals never had a chance to choose, and if they had it would have made no difference.

It is just this sense of purposeless cruelty, though, that gives the clue to Orwell's purpose, as well as to his deadly serious reason for calling ***Animal Farm*** a fairy-story. The point about fairy-stories is that they are written not merely without a moral but without a morality. They take place in a world beyond good and evil, where people (or animals) suffer or prosper for reasons unconnected with ethical merit--for being ugly or beautiful respectively, for instance, or for even more unsatisfactory reasons. A little girl sets out to do a good deed for her grandmother and gets gobbled up by a wolf; a young rogue escapes the gallows (and gets an old Jew hanged instead) by his talent on the fiddle; dozens of young princes die horrible deaths trying to get through the thorn-hedge that surrounds the Sleeping Beauty, just because they had the bad luck to be born before her hundred-year curse expired; and one young prince, no better or worse, no handsomer or uglier than the rest, gets through merely because he has the good luck to arrive just as the hundred years are up; and so on and so on. Even when Grimm's step-mothers are called "wicked," it is well to remember that in German their *Bosheit* is viciousness and bad temper, not moral guilt. For all this is related by the fairy-story tellers without approval or disapproval, without a glimmer of subjective feeling, as though their pens were dipped in surgical spirit to sterilize the microbes of emotion. They never seek to criticize or moralize, to protest or plead or persuade; and if they have an emotional impact on the reader, as the greatest of them do, that is not intrinsic to the stories. They would indeed only weaken that impact in direct proportion as soon as they set out to achieve it. They move by not seeking to move; almost, it seems, by seeking not to move.

The fairy-story that succeeds is in fact not a work of fiction at all; or at least no more so than, say, the opening chapters of Genesis. It is a transcription of a view of life into terms of highly simplified symbols; and when it succeeds in its literary purpose, it leaves us with a deep indefinable feeling of truth; and when it succeeds also, as Orwell set out to do, in a political as well as an artistic purpose, it leaves us also with a feeling of rebelliousness against the truth revealed. It does so not by adjuring us to rebel, but by the barest economy of plain description that language can achieve; and lest it should be thought guilty of a deliberate appeal to the emotions, it uses for characters not rounded, three-dimensional human beings that develop psychologically through time, but fixed stereotypes, puppets, silhouettes--or animals. (A specially good instance is *The Adventures of Pinocchio*: for Pinocchio was in fact a wooden puppet; and when at last, by acquiring a heart and a conscience, he became a little boy instead, at that exact point, with a sure instinct, Collodi brought the whole matter to a full-stop, since he was writing a fairy-tale and not a didactic children's romance.) In these respects *Animal Farm* is after all correctly labelled a fairy-story. Its message (which is by no means a moral) is that of all the great fairy-stories: "Life is like that--take it or leave it." And because it is written by a poet, our reaction is like that of another poet, Edna St. Vincent Millay, to another (not so very different) situation:

I know. But I do not approve. And I am not resigned.

To argue thus is to class Orwell among the poets; and that is not absurd. It happens that when he wrote in verse, the results were not particularly distinguished. The song in *Animal Farm*, "Beasts of England," is not a fair example, since it was no more intended to be poetry than "God Save the Queen": it is in fact a happy example of what Professor Collingwood, in his aesthetic theory, used to call "magic art." But there are a few examples in Orwell's other works (in the post-humous collection of essays, *England Your England*, for example) which do purport to be poetry, and as such fail. Orwell was a poet who happened to find his medium in prose; a poet not so much in his means of expression as in the nature of his vision, which could strip the sprawling tangle of the world around him down to its core with the simplicity of a timeless flash of intuition (the sort of intuition enjoyed by Dionysiacs, according to Plato, or by epileptics, according to Dostoevsky, or by devotees of mescaline, according to Mr. Aldous Huxley); and which then turned deliberately to the most ascetically plain tools of expression to communicate it. He was the kind of prose-writer whom poets accepted as one of themselves, as Shelley accepted Herodotus, Plato, Livy, Plutarch, Bacon, and Rousseau among the poets he was defending in *A Defence of Poetry*. And Shelley, who may be supposed to have known his business, would surely have been glad to accept a writer who so confidently supported, and strove so stubbornly to substantiate, his own claim that "poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world."

Is the claim justified of Orwell? Clearly, not yet; and even for the future, only by offering precarious hostages to fortune. But everything has been a bit precarious since August, 1945, when *Animal Farm* and its formidable twin first saw the light of day together. Which of the two has so far made the biggest impression--there is no blinding or deafening ourselves to that; but Orwell's still, small voice has also made itself continuously heard in its own quiet, persistent, almost nagging way. Already there have been momentary intervals in the nuclear uproar of the mid-twentieth century when its steady, reassuring murmur has come through. Already in a score of countries and a dozen languages *Animal Farm* has made its peculiar mark in translation and in strip-cartoon (one of the most appropriate of modern vehicles for a fairy-story); and the political flavour of its message at least, whether rightly or wrongly particularized, has not been lost in the transcription. Already Orwell has launched the "long haul" of wresting back some of those cardinal, once meaningful, words like "equality," "peace," "democracy," which have been

fraudulently converted into shibboleths of political warfare; and already it is impossible for anyone who has read ***Animal Farm*** (as well as for many who have not) to listen to the demagogues' clap-trap about equality without also hearing the still, small voice that adds: "... but some are more equal than others."

There is a long way to go yet; but there is a long time ahead, too. ***Animal Farm*** will not, like *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, contribute to changing history within a decade or so. But it probably has as good a chance as any contemporary work of winning its author a place--unacknowledged, of course--among Shelley's legislators of the world. And even if the chance does not come off, Orwell has, anyway, two strings to his bow: he is the author of *1984* as well as of ***Animal Farm***. If the worst comes to the worst and he fails as a legislator, he is then virtually certain of immortality as a prophet.

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Animal Farm (1945) is a satirical novella (which can also be understood as a modern fable or allegory) by George Orwell, ostensibly about a group of animals who oust the humans from the farm on which they live. They run the farm themselves, only to have it degenerate into a brutal tyranny of its own. Now, comrades, what is the nature of this life of ours? Let us face it: our lives are miserable, laborious, and short. We are born, we are given just so much food as will keep the breath in our bodies